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ABSTRACT

"Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry" (J. Ruesch and G. Bateson) is a work that outlines in a more conversational than pedantic way a theory of human communication. The main thrust is to unite two types of organized information: (1) an understanding of the cultural matrix within which the psychiatrist operates; and (2) the nature of interaction between people. The first half of the book, written by the psychiatrist of the pair, Ruesch, is a discussion of human beings in terms of values, human relations, mental illness, and U.S. perspectives. Following this is a contribution by Bateson, the anthropologist, who integrates many areas of science and epistemology into the anthropological approach. From an historical perspective (the book was first published in 1951), the publication is a significant, even seminal work. Its major contributions are that it made others in the behavioral and social sciences aware of the abstract notion of a science of human communication, and it created heuristic interest. Alvin Gouldner, probably the leading sociologist today has incorporated into his lectures such aspects of this book as the "command-report" concept. And, one of the leaders in the field of interpersonal psychotherapy, Paul Watzlawick, developed a more sophisticated theory of communication from the groundwork laid by Ruesch and Bateson. (BZ)

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Review of Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry*

by Scott B. Sigmon

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*This is a standard book review of Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson's book Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1968, 2nd ed.).

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Communication: The Social Matrix of Psychiatry is a work that outlines a theory of human communication. The main thrust was to unite two types of organized information - an understanding of the cultural matrix within which the psychiatrist operates and an understanding of the nature of interaction between persons - with psychiatric theory. This monumental task could probably not have been done except by persons eminently qualified within the fields of psychiatry and anthropology, which are the respective fields of Jurgen Ruesch and Gregory Bateson. The intended audience is primarily for those working in the helping professions, but all others having an interest in various aspects of the social sciences as well.

The order of presentation begins with a discussion about human beings per se - relating to values, human relations, mental illness, and American perspectives - which encompasses slightly less than half of the book and is written by the psychiatrist of the pair. The next 40% or so by the anthropologist who begins with an anthropological approach but also brings in many areas of science as well as epistemology. The last of eleven chapters puts it all together and is the only one that is co-authored except for the transitional sixth one. The writing style is more conversational than pedantic for a scholarly piece except for some necessary jargon from specific professional disciplines.

Some basic issues that provided impetus for writing the book are as follows. A recognition that psychiatric practice cannot be done in a vacuum, and the intrapsychic model alone was insufficient to provide a basis for a varied practice. Transactions between people needed further clarification, including the doctor-patient one. More people needed the services of the psychiatric profession, so group methods and consequently a better understanding of groups, the larger culture plus communication was needed. All knowledge of modern physical as well as social sciences should be incorporated into any comprehensive study of such an important area as communication. Retrospectively, the authors wrote in their Preface to the 1965 edition:

> Psychological man was dead and social man had taken his place. However, no unified or general theory was available at that time that could adequately represent the person, the group and society all within one system.

When viewed from an historical perspective (the book was first published in 1951), the importance of the above issues can be more fully appreciated. These issues were never comprehensively addressed before. World War II and the period immediately following it created a need for change because a new way of life was forced upon everyone. During this era psychiatry was undergoing a period of major transformation, as was the rest of American society and the entire world for that matter. A faster and more radical change than ever before, this was the beginning of the nuclear age.

There was great interest in cybernetics then, computer science had just been born and the notions of feedback, person to machine communication, machine to machine communication, messages, and programming systems were

very exciting to intellectuals in all fields. The study of a human communication theory was also an idea whose time had come. The influence of communications engineers toward this endeavor was vast. These engineers had achieved a remarkably swift advance in the state of the art in electronic communication by this time as a result of the necessity to support the war effort. Advances in technology - especially in radio, radar, and other forms of electronic communications - had provided a decisive edge over the enemy. Much of the military radio-electronic argot such as transmitter, receiver, network, circuits, overload, jamming, etc., was adopted. The concept of "codification" will be used to delineate this on two levels since it is a function of the theory itself and symbolically typifies the origin of many of the terms. From the book:

> ...codification is, we think, of such a general nature as to be common to all psychological theories, though not always explicit. Whether we favor organicist or mentalist concepts, it is clear that the intrapersonal processes are distinctly different from the events in the external world, and the concept of codification refers to this difference. Using an organicist phrasing, one might say that impulses and showers of impulses traveling in the neural network are the internal reflection or picture of the external events about which the organism is receiving information through his sense organs. Or following mentalist theories, one may say that ideas and propositions (whether verbal or nonverbal) are the translation or reflection of external events. In either theory...internal events are different from external and are reflections or translations of events in the external world. The term used by communications engineers for the substitution of one type of event for another, such that the event substituted shall in some sense stand for the other, is codification....there must be a systematic relationship between the internal and the external, otherwise the information would not be useful. The engineer's term for nonsystematic elements in codification is "noise." (Strictly there is, of course, no "decodification"....The information is never translated back into the actual objects to which it refers.)

The authors' major contribution was their abstract notion of a science of human communication. However, their major concrete contribution is a matrix for comprehending it. There are four major levels:

I. Intrapersonal - "within one"

II. Interpersonal - "one to one"

III. A. Group - "one to many" centrifugal messages

B. Group - "many to one" centripetal messages

IV. A. Cultural - "space binding" messages of "many to many"

B. Cultural - "time binding" messages of "many to many"

The four levels must be examined in relation to the "origin of message, sender, channels, receiver, and the destination of the message."

In summary, Communication is a significant publication since it is the seminal work in the field. No reference is later than 1950. The major contribution of this volume is that it made aware other persons in the behavioral and social sciences the value of the topic and created heuristic interest. The theory is primitive, but it is the basis for later, more refined ones. Alvin Gouldner, probably the leading sociologist today, discusses various aspects from this book in his lectures, especially the "command-report" concept. ("On the one hand, the message is a statement or report about events at a previous moment, and on the other hand it is a command-a cause or stimulus for events at a later moment.") Also, Paul Watzlawick, one of the leaders in the field of interpersonal psychotherapy today, developed a more sophisticated theory of communication (Pragmatics of Human Communication, 1967), but it has its roots here. In short, Communication is must reading; it is a classic.